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(71) Applicant: **EWAYDIRECT, INC.** [US/US]; 4th Floor,
Suite 19B-2, 25 Van Zant Street, Norwalk, CT 06855 (US).

(72) Inventor: **DELANO, Paul**; Suite 304, 163 Amsterdam
Avenue, New York, NY 10023 (US).

(74) Agents: **DELUCA, Vincent, M.** et al.; Rothwell, Figg,
Ernst & Manbeck, Suite 701 East, Columbia Square, 555
13th Street N.W., Washington, DC 20004 (US).

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(54) Title: APPARATUS AND METHOD FOR COOPERATIVE ELECTRONIC PUBLISHING

(57) Abstract: A cooperative electronic publishing method and apparatus is provided. The apparatus includes a subscribers database of subscriber email addresses, facsimile numbers or voicemail telephone numbers, a content database of pre-created content articles, with content articles of the content database being selectable by a publisher for inclusion in an electronic newsletter, a communications link to a digital electronic network, and a mailer that transmits newsletters over the communications link, wherein the publisher may use the apparatus to generate and transmit electronic newsletters, either by email, automatic facsimile, or voicemail.



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APPARATUS AND METHOD FOR COOPERATIVE ELECTRONIC PUBLISHING

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates generally to a cooperative
5 electronic publishing system, and more particularly to an on-
line computer-implemented cooperative electronic publishing
system.

2. Description of the Background Art

A newsletter is a publication generally created and
10 distributed by a person or organization free of charge and to a
limited audience. It is generally smaller, more personalized,
and more limited in scope than typical commercial publications.
It is focused at interested subscribers, who may come and go
over time. A newsletter may include content such as information
15 articles, stories, history pieces, notices, calendars of events,
personal contact information, and even advertisements and other
commercial messages.

A newsletter may be published for any one of multiple
purposes. Generally, the purpose is to communicate with a large
20 group of people and to disseminate information in some way.
Therefore, the target audience of a newsletter is generally a
group of persons with something in common. The newsletter may
maintain communication, may keep people together (i.e., family,
classmates, etc.), and may present products and services to the
25 public.

Newsletter creation and distribution has become faster, simpler, and cheaper as technology has progressed. Computer technology has made printed newsletters much easier to create, while also making possible a better appearance. Electronic mail (email) creates an additional distribution channel, wherein would-be publishers can electronically transmit a document to a group of people without typical publishing costs such as paper supplies, printing costs, and postage. The basic requirements are a computer, a communications link to a digital electronic network, and a list of email addresses. The only people who are unlikely to become email publishers are the people without the computer facilities, without the time, or without the expertise.

The drawbacks to electronic newsletter publication are a need for computer and electronic communications expertise, a lack of equipment capacity (i.e., memory capacity, processor speed, number of access lines, etc.), a time required to generate and organize content, and a time required to maintain and oversee operations and records.

Therefore, there remains a need in the art for improvements to newsletter publication via email, as well as via other forms of transmission such as facsimile, or even voicemail.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

A cooperative electronic publishing apparatus for forming an on-line electronic newsletter is provided according to a first aspect of the invention. The apparatus comprises a subscribers' database of subscriber addresses (i.e., email addresses, voicemail telephone numbers, or facsimile telephone

numbers) a content database of pre-created content articles with content articles of the content database being selectable by a publisher for inclusion in an electronic newsletter, a communications link to a digital electronic network, and a
5 mailer that transmits newsletters over the communications link, wherein the publisher may use the apparatus to generate and transmit electronic newsletters.

An on-line, computer-implemented method for forming an electronic newsletter using a cooperative electronic publishing
10 system is provided according to a second aspect of the invention. The method comprises the steps of storing a list of subscribers, storing pre-created content articles for use by publishers, assembling a newsletter body for an individual publisher of selected pre-created content articles, and
15 transmitting the newsletter body to subscribers contained in the list of subscribers, wherein the individual publisher creates the list of subscribers and selects one or more content articles from the pre-created content articles to form the electronic newsletter body, and a newsletter thus formed is transmitted to
20 subscribers in the list of subscribers.

A mailer method for generating an on-line, computer-implemented electronic newsletter using a cooperative electronic publishing system is provided according to a third aspect of the invention. The method comprises the steps of retrieving an
25 address template for a subscriber, selecting one or more content articles for the subscriber according to the address template, combining the one or more content articles to form a newsletter, and formatting the newsletter according to the address template and transmitting the newsletter to the subscriber.

The above and other features and advantages of the present invention will be further understood from the following description of the preferred embodiment thereof, taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

5

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 shows the information flow between the various parties involved in and using the present invention;

FIG. 2 shows one embodiment of the internal components of the publishing apparatus according to the invention;

10

FIG. 3 shows a flowchart of a basic embodiment of a method according to the invention;

FIG. 4 shows a flowchart illustrating further detail of the newsletter body assembly process;

15

FIG. 5 shows a flowchart of an embodiment of a mailer method of the present invention; and

FIG. 6 shows a flowchart of a response from a subscriber.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

20

It has been shown that people respond positively to electronic content via email or other "push" technologies if the information is clearly presented and contains content that they are interested in. Likewise, it is desirable for electronic content publishers and service providers to "push" content to their members, prospects, or customers to inform them of the available content and services.

25

FIG. 1 shows the information flow between the various parties involved in and using the present invention. The essential element in the cooperative electronic publishing system is a publishing apparatus 102, which implements the

present invention. The publishing apparatus 102 may communicate with one or more publishers 105 and one or more subscribers 108. In addition, the publishing apparatus 102 may further communicate with one or more email list sources 113, one or more content sources 116, and one or more content sponsors 119. It will be recognized that the publishers, content sources, content sponsors and email list sources could be the same entity. Additionally, while the present invention will be described in terms of email, it will be understood that other forms of newsletter publication such as automatic facsimile or even voicemail (wherein the contents of the newsletter are transmitted aurally) could be used in accordance with the invention. In this regard, the list sources also could provide voicemail or facsimile telephone numbers for the recipients of the electronic newsletter.

The publishing apparatus 102 is the core system to which the various members subscribe and interact. It contains all of the databases and functionality needed to provide the cooperative publishing services, including tracking of email addresses, content libraries, publications, revenue sharing information, configuration, and transaction logging.

The publishing apparatus 102 may communicate with the above and other digital network sites over a digital computer network (not shown, see FIG. 2), and may be connected to a digital computer network via a communication link such as a phone line accessed via a modem or a computer network accessed via a network interface card, for example.

The publishing apparatus 102 may communicate with one or more publishers 105 to collect license fees (for content

articles provided by the publishing apparatus 102 or license fees for joining the system), to distribute a revenue share (where a publisher 105 is due revenue for including a link to a related site or for including sponsored content articles), or to
5 receive email messages and self-created publications from individual publishers.

The publishing apparatus 102 may communicate with one or more subscribers 108 to send email publications (newsletters), to receive email messages from subscribers 108 (messages
10 subscribing to or unsubscribing from an email newsletter), or to act as a conduit when a newsletter subscriber selects a link in a newsletter (relaying a message to the content sponsor 119). The link may allow a subscriber to contact and interact with a content sponsor 119.

15 The publishing apparatus 102 may communicate with one or more email list sources 113 to receive email addresses and to pay license fees or a revenue share in return. The email list sources 113 may be publishers 105 or may be independent entities, as shown. The email list sources 113 may receive
20 license fees or revenue sharing in return for providing lists of email addresses.

The publishing apparatus 102 may communicate with one or more content sources 116 to purchase content articles (news, stories, informative essays, entertainment, etc.), and to pay
25 license fees or a revenue share in return. The content articles thus obtained may be selected and purchased by individual publishers 105 to be included in newsletters. In addition to selecting pre-created content articles, publishers 105 may be also create content articles and become content sources 116.

The publishing apparatus 102 may communicate with one or more content sponsors 119 to relay subscriber communications (when a subscriber selects a link to a related content), and to receive license fees or revenue share in payment for subscriber responses.

In summary, the publishing apparatus 102 therefore represents an apparatus that may be used by publishers 105 to easily and conveniently create and transmit email newsletters to subscribers 108. Publishers 105 may be any person or organization who wishes to communicate electronically with a group of people.

Publication sites are created within the publishing apparatus 102 via an interactive or automatic interface. Publication sites may therefore be sub-units of the publishing apparatus 102, where each publisher has a publication site contained within the publishing apparatus 102 and dependent on the publishing apparatus 102 in order to function. Once a publication site is created, any number of publications may be sent out of the site. Each publication site includes a content library, subscriber lists, configuration settings, and logging databases.

Overall, the present invention is a smart electronic newsletter apparatus and method that through a tracking system, libraries, and feedback, allows publishers to dramatically improve the performance of an electronic newsletter by targeting the most relevant content to individual sub-groups of recipients (subscribers).

The publishing apparatus 102 allows publishers to form a newsletter by creating their own content articles and by

choosing from a library of pre-created and stored content articles. In each publication site, subscriber lists are interactively and automatically created, maintained, and updated according to subscriber input and according to subscriber
5 interests and activities. Common system content suitable for including in various publications is interactively and automatically collected and organized by category from various information sources. Each content item is associated with a specific subscriber action, such as viewing a web page via a URL
10 or filling out a form. Each subscriber action may also have an "offer" or revenue opportunity associated with it.

One benefit of the present invention is the availability of sponsored content to the participating publishers. A publisher may defray some or all of the cost of using the publishing
15 apparatus 102 by incorporating sponsored content into a newsletter, so that content sponsors provide payment in return for sponsorship and advertising.

A further benefit of the present invention is that a publisher does not need a significant level of expertise in
20 publishing or in electronic communications. Using the publishing apparatus 102 of the present invention, a publisher can easily and simply create a newsletter by selecting content and by setting up one or more newsletter templates containing formatting instructions.

25 FIG. 2 shows one embodiment of the internal components of the publishing apparatus 102. The publishing apparatus 102 includes public content libraries 221, private content libraries 224, a publication archive 227, a publication schedule 232, an active publications database 235, a publisher administration

238, a database of subscriber email addresses 240, a publication log 244, a mailer 246, a response handler 249, and a communications link 250 (although shown as multiple links, the publishing apparatus 102 may function as described while being connected to only a single such link 250).

The public content library 221 is a library or libraries of pre-created content articles supplied by the content providers 116. In addition, the pre-created content articles may contain links to content sponsors 119. The pre-created content articles used in a newsletter may be chosen from those stored in the public content library 221. Although one such library may be sufficient, alternatively multiple libraries may exist wherein the individual libraries may be organized or separated by content types or by other characteristics.

The private content libraries 224 contain content of a publisher (i.e., created or supplied by that publisher). Therefore, each individual publisher may have a private content library within the private content libraries 224. Content articles created and stored in a private library may be later reused by the creating publisher or may be licensed or sold to the cooperative electronic publishing system for use by all publishers.

The publication archive 227 may store old newsletters that have been created and transmitted. Old newsletters may therefore be recalled and reused. The publication archive 227 may store both the message body (all text, graphics, links, etc.), and a list of all recipients of a newsletter.

The publication schedule 232 is a database of all publication schedules for all active publications. Active

publications are newsletters that have transmissions remaining. The publication schedule controls when an active newsletter will be transmitted to designated recipients, and a publication schedule may be created for each newsletter. For example, a publication may be scheduled to be sent on a particular date, in a recurring interval, such as weekly, or on a scheduled sequence determined by the subscriber status.

The active publications database 235 contains all active newsletters.

The publisher administration 238 is responsible for managing the database of subscriber email addresses 240 (i.e., adding or removing email addresses upon request). The publisher administration 238 modifies the database of subscriber email addresses 240 in response to new subscribers and in response to an updated subscriber status (as determined from responses captured in the publication log 244).

The database of subscriber email addresses 240 is a database of all current and past subscribers. It also contains profile and status information so that a publisher can track the status of each subscriber. The profile and status information can also be used to sequence and filter publications so that each subscriber only gets what is appropriate.

The publication log 244 contains all subscriber response activity.

The mailer 246 may create a newsletter as specified by a publisher and may transmit the newsletter to all subscribers on a recipient list, as dictated by the publication schedule 232 (see text accompanying FIG. 5).

The response handler 249 receives incoming message traffic and exchanges data. For example, if a subscriber 108 sends an "unsubscribe" message to the publishing apparatus 102, the response handler 249 removes the subscriber's email address from the database of subscriber email addresses 240.

Subscriber responses may be received via email messages sent to the appropriate email address of the cooperative electronic publishing system, or by a subscriber's selection of a link. The responses are formatted so that the response handler 249 can track the subscriber, the publication, and the content item that prompted the response.

The communications link 250 may be single or multiple communication lines. The communications link 250 connects the publishing apparatus 102 to all external sites, such as one or more publishers 105, one or more subscribers 108, one or more email list sources 113, one or more content providers 116, and one or more content sponsors 119. It should be apparent that the communications link 250 may connect the publishing apparatus 102 to a digital computer network, such as the Internet, an Intranet, a Virtual Private Network, etc. Therefore, the communications link 250 allows communication with all other sites connected to the digital computer network.

Optionally, the publishing apparatus 102 may also include a publishers database (not shown), containing information on all publishers who are allowed to access the cooperative electronic publishing system. Access may be granted based on registration or payment of a fee. Access may be regulated by use of security measures, such as a password, for example.

FIG. 3 shows a flowchart 300 of a basic embodiment of a method of the invention. In step 303, a list of subscribers may be stored. The subscribers in the list of subscribers are the recipients of a newsletter.

5 In step 306, pre-created content articles are stored for use in newsletters. This may include content articles created by content providers or created by publishers themselves. These content articles may be selected from in order to form a newsletter.

10 In step 309, a newsletter body is assembled. This is accomplished by a publisher selecting and specifying content articles, and optionally by selecting links to related sites. The selection may be performed during an initial newsletter template creation phase or may be performed concurrently with
15 the newsletter assembly process. Related sites may contain commercial messages (sponsorship), with the publisher being rewarded for including sponsored content in a newsletter.

In step 311, the assembled newsletter is transmitted to all subscribers specified by the publisher. This may preferably be
20 done through a recipient list created beforehand and stored in the publishing apparatus 102, but alternatively may be specified in other ways, such as specified manually at the time of publication, for example.

Optionally, a publisher may create subscriber sub-groups,
25 with sub-groups having different transmission schedules.

FIG. 4 shows a flowchart 400 illustrating further detail of the newsletter body assembly process. In step 405, newsletter content articles selected by the publisher are assembled. In the preferred embodiment, copies of the selected content

articles may be placed in an active publication 235 (see FIG. 2). The active publication 235 may be memory storage space within the publishing apparatus 102.

5 In optional step 410, the publisher may create content to include in the newsletter. This self-created content may be stored in an associated library of the private content libraries 224 (see FIG. 2), or may be transferred to the public content libraries 221 in exchange for a license fee or revenue share.

10 In optional step 416, links to related content may be added to the newsletter body. This is preferably in the form of sponsored content, wherein the sponsored content may contain a link, such as a hypertext link or other electronic labels, for example, to a sponsor's site on the associated digital computer network. The publisher may then receive a license or revenue
15 share in exchange for the link. In this manner, a publisher may defray some or all of the cost of using the publishing apparatus 102.

In step 424, the newsletter body is formatted. Formatting may include, for example, line wrapping, line spacing, margins,
20 font type and size, indentation, paragraph structure, style, etc. The format may be chosen by the particular publisher, or may be fixed by the publishing apparatus 102, as desired. A publisher may use a pre-created template to set the email format, or may create his or her own format template.

25 In step 428, the publisher may create a publication schedule which determines a message transmission time or times. The newsletter is transmitted according to the schedule.

FIG. 5 shows a flowchart 500 of an embodiment of a mailer method of the present invention. In step 505, it is determined

whether a publication is scheduled to be transmitted. If a publication is scheduled, the method proceeds to step 515 (the steps below may be done for each scheduled publication), else the method exits.

5 In step 515, the mailer 246 gets a list of email recipients, as setup by the publisher. The recipient list may be contained, for example, in a separate database, in an email template, or elsewhere, as desired. For each subscriber in the recipient list, the following steps are executed.

10 In step 518, an email template is selected for each subscriber according to their preferences contained in the database. For example, some subscribers need a flat text email template, while others have email client applications that can support better-looking hyper-text markup language (html) based
15 email.

 In step 523, specific content articles are selected from the list of content articles according to subscriber preferences. For example, if the newsletter is a Northern California Activities publication, and a subscriber has
20 expressed an interest in wine but not for bicycling, then the particular newsletter may receive all of the wine content, while the bicycling content may be excluded.

 In step 528, the newsletter is formatted and transmitted to a subscriber as dictated by the email template.

25 In step 533, each newsletter is logged to the publication archive 227.

 FIG. 6 shows a flowchart 600 of a response from a subscriber. The subscriber responses are received from subscribers via an email sent to the appropriate email address,

or by the user selecting a link. The responses are formatted so that the response handler 249 can track who the user was, and the publication and content item that prompted the response. A subscriber may send an email message to the publishing apparatus 102 to modify his or her subscriber account information (including subscribing or unsubscribing), or may respond to a link in a sponsored content. In step 601, if a response is received from a subscriber, the method proceeds to step 607, else it exits.

In step 607, the email message from the subscriber is logged. Preferably, the response is saved to the publication log 244, including the subscriber identification, the publication, and the content item that prompted the response. This may include a message relay to a content sponsor 119 if the response is to a sponsored content article. If the email message is an administrative matter such as a subscribe/unsubscribe message, for example, the response handler 249 may alter the contents of the database of subscriber email addresses 240 (see FIG. 2). In addition, a subscriber can interactively modify his or her interests or other personal information, affecting which newsletters are received by the subscriber.

In step 611, if the response is to a sponsored content link, a reward may be given to the content sponsor, such as a license fee or a revenue share. A response may include, for example, visiting a world-wide web site, opting-in to offers, or purchasing goods or services.

While the invention has been described in detail above, the invention is not intended to be limited to the specific

embodiments as described. It is evident that those skilled in the art may now make numerous uses and modifications of and departures from the specific embodiments described herein without departing from the inventive concepts.

What is claimed is:

1 1. A cooperative electronic publishing apparatus for
2 forming an on-line electronic newsletter, comprising:
3 a subscribers database of subscriber communication
4 addresses;
5 a content database of pre-created content articles, with
6 content articles of said content database being selectable by a
7 publisher for inclusion in an electronic newsletter;
8 a communications link to a digital electronic network; and
9 a mailer that transmits newsletters over said
10 communications link;
11 wherein said publisher may use said apparatus to generate
12 and transmit electronic newsletters.

1 2. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said subscriber
2 database contains profile and status information on said
3 subscribers.

1 3. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said digital
2 electronic network is the Internet.

1 4. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said content database
2 further includes:
3 a public content area for all publishers to access; and
4 private content areas for individual publishers.

1 5. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said apparatus
2 further includes an active publications database of active
3 publications to be transmitted.

1 6. The apparatus of claim 5, wherein said active
2 publications database further includes publication schedules
3 associated with said active publications.

1 7. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said apparatus
2 further includes a publications archive containing transmitted
3 newsletters that are no longer active.

1 8. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said apparatus
2 further includes a publishers database of publishers who are
3 allowed to access said cooperative electronic publishing
4 apparatus.

1 9. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said apparatus
2 further includes a publisher administration, said publisher
3 administration managing said subscribers database.

1 10. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said apparatus
2 further includes a publications archive that logs all
3 transmitted newsletters, including, for each transmitted
4 newsletter:

5 a newsletter body; and
6 an associated subscriber list.

1 11. The apparatus of claim 1, wherein said apparatus
2 further includes a response handler that receives and logs all
3 subscriber responses.

1 12. An on-line, computer-implemented method for forming an
2 electronic newsletter using a cooperative electronic publishing
3 system, comprising the steps of:

4 storing a list of subscribers;
5 storing pre-created content articles for use by publishers;
6 assembling a newsletter body for an individual publisher of
7 selected pre-created content articles; and
8 transmitting said newsletter body to subscribers contained
9 in said list of subscribers;

10 wherein said individual publisher creates said list of
11 subscribers and selects one or more content articles from said
12 pre-created content articles to form said electronic newsletter
13 body, and a newsletter thus formed is transmitted to subscribers
14 in said list of subscribers.

1 13. The method of claim 12, wherein said assembling step
2 includes formatting said newsletter body.

1 14. The method of claim 12, wherein a newsletter is
2 created using a template stored in said cooperative electronic
3 publishing system.

1 15. The method of claim 12, wherein an individual
2 publisher can add a link to other related content.

1 16. The method of claim 15, wherein a publisher receives
2 revenue every time said individual publisher's newsletter
3 subscribers select a link to said other related content.

1 17. The method of claim 12, wherein said publishers can
2 sell advertisement space in said newsletter.

1 18. The method of claim 12, wherein said individual
2 publisher can create content articles.

1 19. The method of claim 18, wherein said individual
2 publisher can sell content created by said individual publisher
3 to said cooperative electronic publishing system.

1 20. The method of claim 12, wherein said newsletter body
2 contains text.

1 21. The method of claim 12, wherein said newsletter body
2 contains graphics.

1 22. The method of claim 12, wherein said newsletter body
2 contains links to network sites.

1 23. The method of claim 12, wherein said transmitting step
2 occurs at a time dictated by a transmission schedule created by
3 said individual publisher.

1 24. The method of claim 23, wherein a transmission
2 schedule is stored for later use.

1 25. The method of claim 12, wherein said publishers can
2 schedule multiple transmissions of a newsletter.

1 26. The method of claim 12, wherein said publishers can
2 create multiple subscriber lists for a particular newsletter.

1 27. The method of claim 12, wherein an email message
2 format for a subscriber is stored.

1 28. The method of claim 12, wherein a newsletter body of a
2 transmitted newsletter is archived.

1 29. The method of claim 12, wherein a subscriber list of a
2 transmitted newsletter is archived.

1 30. The method of claim 12, wherein said publishers
2 provide content to said newsletter body.

1 31. The method of claim 12, wherein a publisher may update
2 said list of subscribers at any time.

1 32. The method of claim 12, wherein a response to a
2 newsletter by a newsletter subscriber is stored.

1 33. The method of claim 12, wherein a newsletter
2 subscriber may unsubscribe from receiving a newsletter.

1 34. The method of claim 12, wherein said assembling step
2 further includes the steps of:

3 assembling a newsletter body for an individual publisher of
4 selected pre-created content articles;

5 creating content articles for inclusion in said newsletter;
6 linking to related content;
7 formatting said newsletter; and
8 scheduling a transmission of said newsletter.

1 35. The method of claim 34, wherein said newsletter is
2 transmitted according to a created schedule.

1 36. A mailer method for generating an on-line, computer-
2 implemented electronic newsletter using a cooperative electronic
3 publishing system, comprising the steps of:
4 retrieving an address template for a subscriber;
5 selecting one or more content articles for said subscriber
6 according to said address template;
7 combining said one or more content articles to form a
8 newsletter; and
9 formatting said newsletter according to said address
10 template and transmitting said newsletter to said subscriber.

1 37. The method of claim 36, further including a
2 preliminary step of determining whether a publication is
3 scheduled, wherein the getting, selecting, combining, and
4 formatting steps are performed if a publication is scheduled.

1 38. The method of claim 36, further including a step of
2 getting a subscriber list for a newsletter, said subscriber list
3 containing communication addresses of all subscribers contained
4 in said subscriber list.

1 39. The method of claim 36, wherein said address template
2 is created by a subscriber.

1 40. The method of claim 36, wherein said address template
2 is created by said cooperative electronic publishing system.

1 41. The method of claim 36, wherein said formatting is
2 controlled by said address template.

1 42. The method of claim 36, wherein said process is
2 performed for each subscriber on a subscriber list.

1 43. The method of claim 36, further including a step of
2 logging said newsletter.

1 44. The method of claim 36, wherein said individual
2 publisher can create content articles.

1 45. The method of claim 36, wherein said individual
2 publisher can sell content created by said individual publisher
3 to said cooperative electronic publishing system.

1 46. The method of claim 36, wherein said newsletter body
2 contains text.

1 47. The method of claim 36, wherein said newsletter body
2 contains graphics.

1 48. The method of claim 36, wherein a response to a
2 newsletter by a newsletter subscriber is stored.

1 49. The method of claim 36, wherein a newsletter
2 subscriber may unsubscribe from receiving a newsletter.

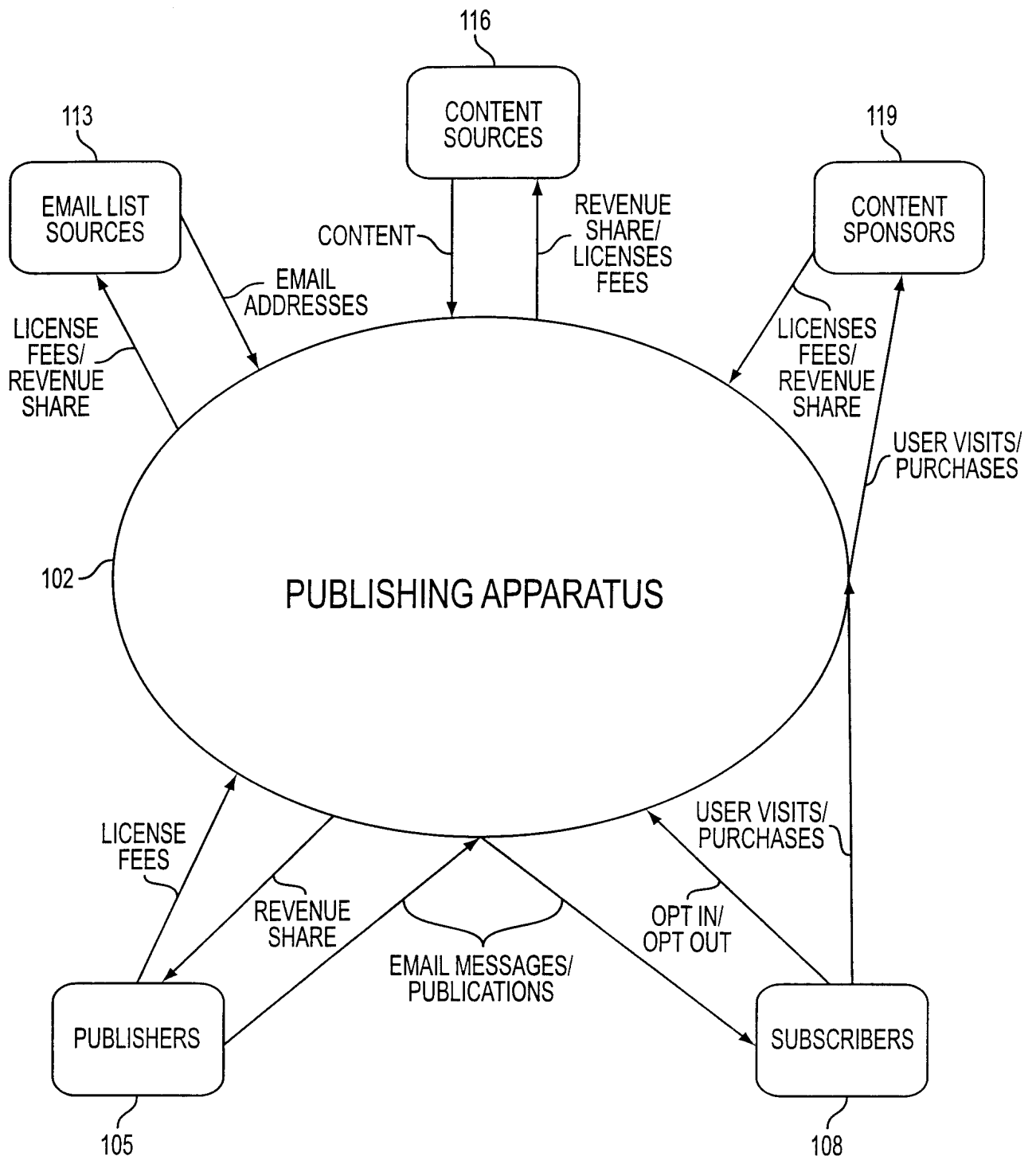


FIG. 1

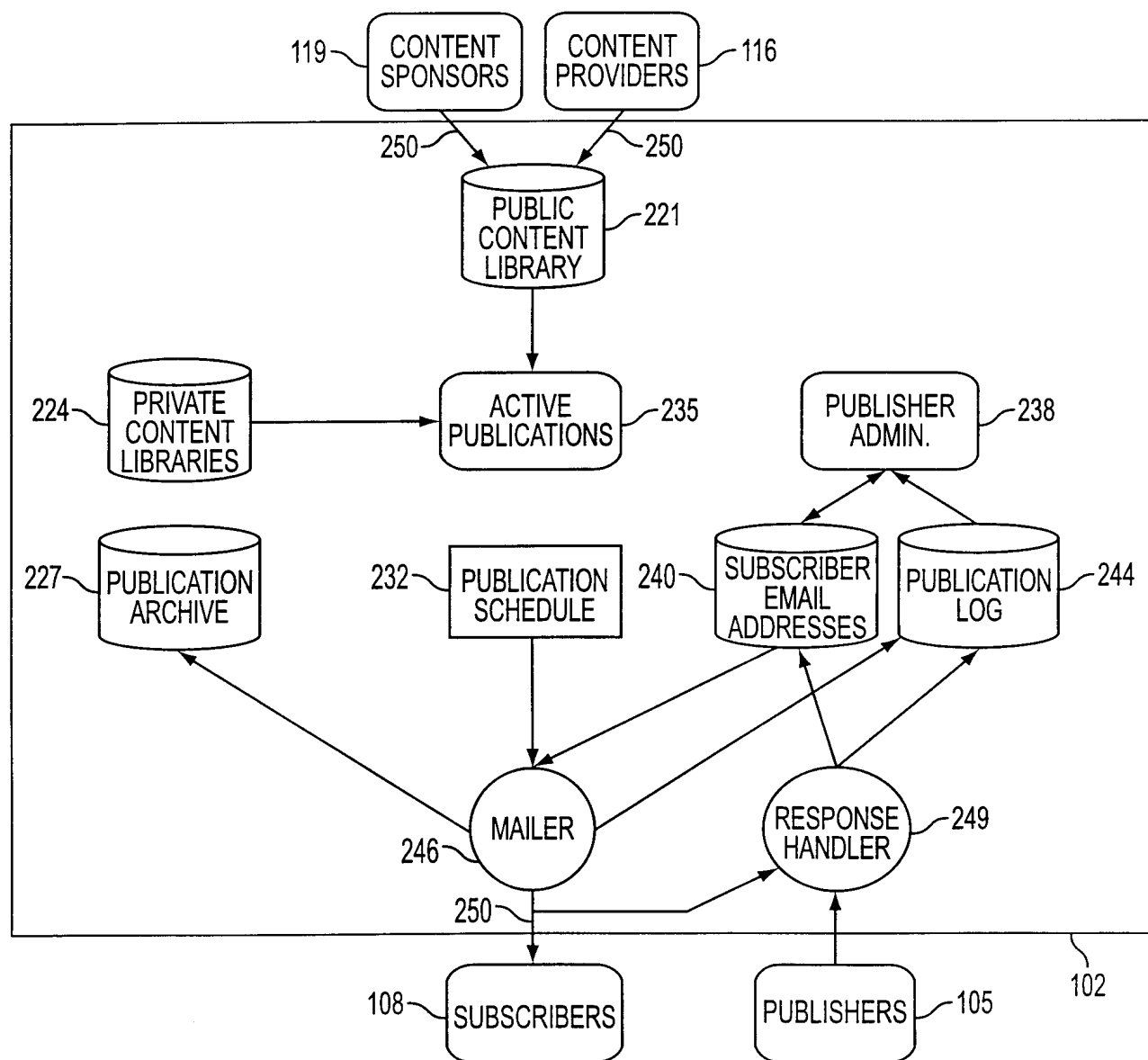


FIG. 2

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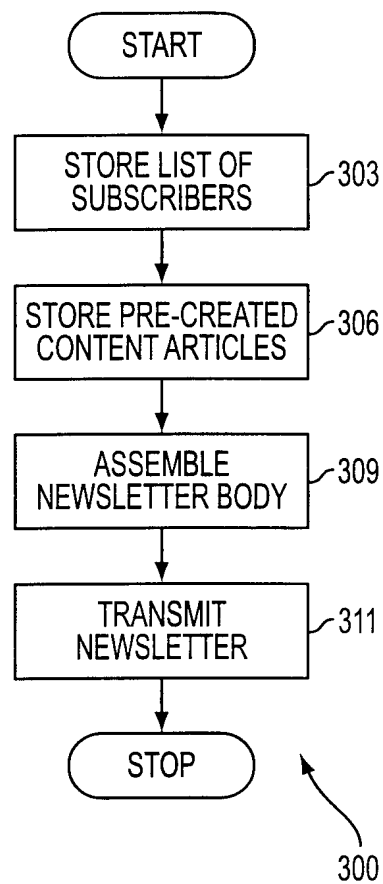


FIG. 3

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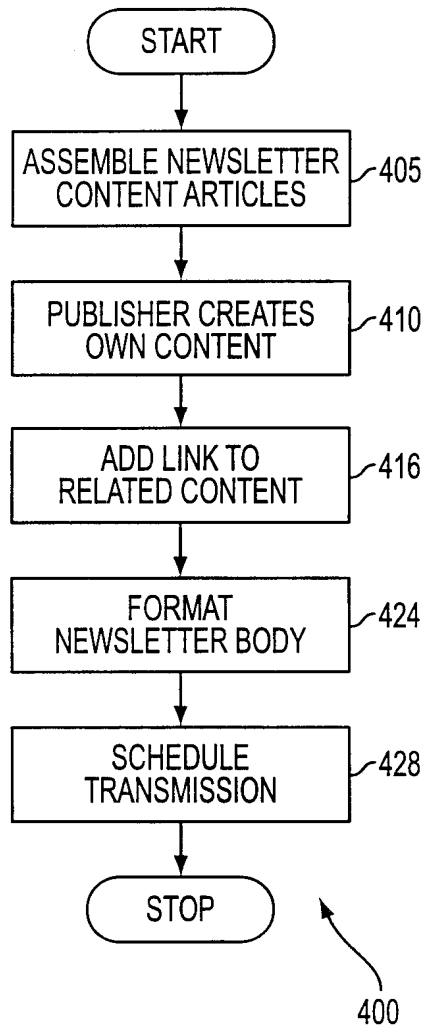


FIG. 4

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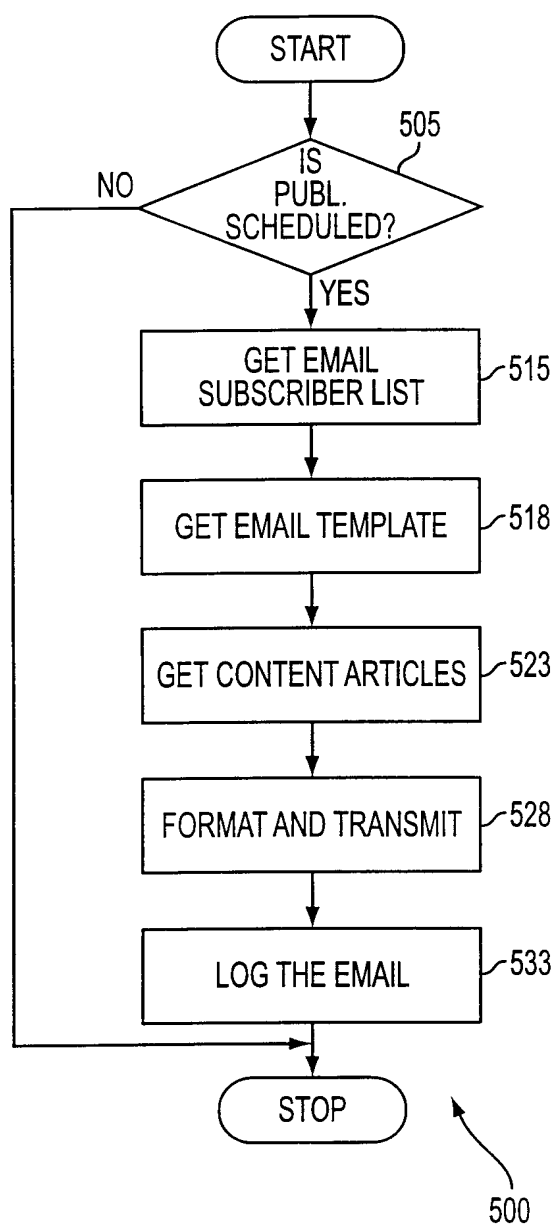


FIG. 5

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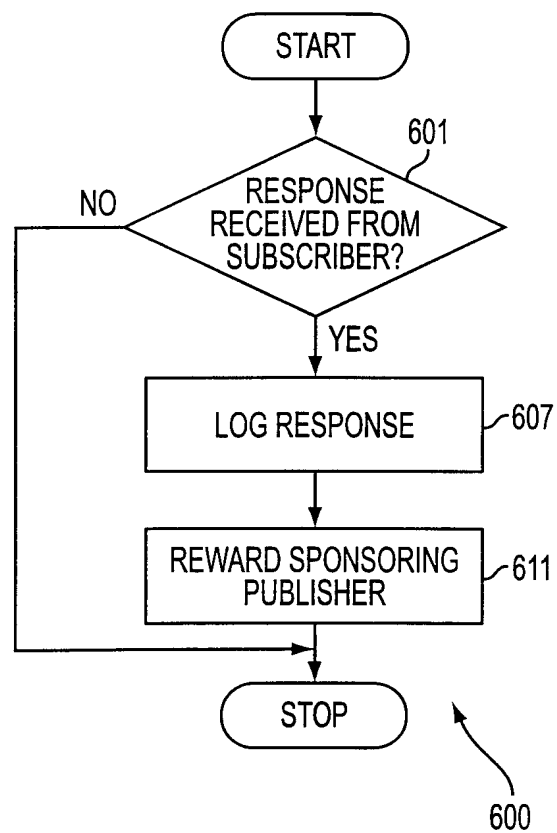


FIG. 6